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ABSTRACT

In an audience research study, 64 high school students responded to a questionnaire concerning their movie attendance habits and the importance of ten variables to their decision-making process when choosing a movie to see. The results indicated that 26.6% attended movies once a month, 23.4% twice monthly, 6.3% three times a month, 4.7% four times a month, 1.6% more than four times a month, and 37.5% less than once a month. Of the ten variables (plot, friends' comments, rating, director, female star, music, male star, parents, producer, and writer), the most important variable to these respondents was the movie's plot. Nearly 85% of the sample reported film plot as either very important or important in influencing their film attendance decision. Summing the very important and important percentages of responses, other influential variables included: friends' comments, the film's rating, female star, and male star. Alternatively, almost an equal number judged the female and male stars respectively as neither important nor unimportant. Males reported friends' comments and film plot as significantly more important to their attendance decision than did females. (MKM)

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MOTION PICTURE ATTENDANCE AND FACTORS INFLUENCING
MOVIE SELECTION AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

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Bruce A. Austin

While a great deal of effort has been expended on developing aesthetic theories of film, little, in contrast, has been directed to an equally important facet of the medium: the film audience. In fact, as a recent comprehensive bibliography of film audience research demonstrates (3), fewer than 100 such empirical studies have been conducted since 1960. The pilot study reported here, which was part of a larger inquiry, details the results of an investigation which sought to ascertain the importance of selected film production, and two external, variables on movie attendance. The production variables examined include film music, screenwriter, producer, director, male star, female star, plot, and Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating. These variables, with the exception of the last two (plot and rating) were selected for study based on Simonet's (22) research. Using the experience records of these production personnel in a multiple regression equation, Simonet found that they accounted for two-thirds of the film revenue variance in top-grossing films. He did not, however, test the influence of these variables on actual subjects. The two external variables, what friends and parents say about a picture, were based selected for investigation [^] on the well-documented research on personal influence and mass communications.¹

Since the present investigation was a pilot study, research questions rather than hypotheses were raised. Further, due to the exploratory nature of this investigation, the sampling procedure, and sample size, the external validity of this study is limited and, therefore, no attempt will be made to generalize beyond this sample. (In addition, the usual cautions concern-

ing self-report data are applicable.) Given that an individual has elected to go to the movies and has more than one film from which to choose, the research questions this study addresses are:

1. How important are these variables to an individual deciding which film to attend?
2. What are the relationships among these variables?
3. Using these variables, can a predictive equation reaching statistical significance be constructed?

In 1953 Handel (13, p. 310) noted that "Audience research is well entrenched in all media of mass communications except film" and attributed this, in part, to Hollywood's resistance to such research. A thorough review of the literature, however, reveals that, albeit sporadically and somewhat tentatively -- even timidly at times -- and with varying degrees of validity and reliability, film audience research has been conducted and published practically since the medium's inception (with particular, and in one sense predictable, emphasis on film's potential effects on children).² Although numerically the number of studies conducted may, at first blush, seem glowingly impressive, the shine tends to dull when considered from the perspective of a medium with a nearly one hundred year history. (One might wish to compare the simple frequency of movie audience studies with, for example, those of a much more recent medium, television.) Moreover, film audience research is often directed more toward reinventing the wheel and less toward innovative advances in the body of knowledge. As always, exceptions exist and a brief review of several recent studies is appropriate.

The make-up of the first audiences for motion pictures was examined by

Jowett (17) and discussed in terms of the religious, social, and economic ambiance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Employing a modified version of Thurstone's movie attitude scale (23), Bannerman and Lewis (4) reported "slightly to moderately favorable" attitudes toward movies by college students. Robinson (21) used Q-technique analysis to uncover six clusters of individuals with regard to their attitudes toward television and film. Research by Boyanowsky (5) and Boyanowsky, Newston, and Walster (6) offer evidence as to audience film content preference and attendance following, respectively, the occurrence of a physical attack and a murder. Positive correlations between movie attendance and four types of film content (eroticism, violence, mishaps, and luxury) were found by Anast (1). The composition of the drive-in theater audience was discussed by Britt (7) and the uses and gratifications approach to film audience research was taken by O'Brien (19). Finally, there is also a growing body of foreign and cross-cultural film audience literature (11, 12).³ And, social science aside, the relationship between film and its audience has been a perennial focus of attention for the methodologically less rigorous armchair philosophers.⁴

Using a convenience sample, respondents to the self-administered questionnaire utilized for this study were members of high school classes in English and Film. The high school is located in a middle-class, residential New Jersey town. The data were collected on one day in mid-March, 1979. A total of 65 questionnaires were collected of which 64 were usable. Forty males and 24 females participated in the final analyses. Respondents ranged in age from 15 to 18 with most (55%) being 17 years old. The participants were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire inquiring as to

their movie attendance habits and the importance of the previously mentioned ten variables to their decision-making process when choosing a movie to go see. With minor grammatical modifications, the format for all the variable questions was: "When you are deciding which movie to go see, about how important would you say who the film's _____ is in making your decision." The respondents' feeling about the importance of each variable was measured on a five-point rating scale. Response options ranged from "very important" to "very unimportant." Since not all participants chose to respond to every item, the exact N for each question is reported in the tables.

The frequency of film attendance for the respondents in this sample was as follows: 26.6% said they attended movies once a month, 23.4% twice monthly, 6.3% three times a month, 4.7% four times a month, 1.6% more than four times a month, and 37.5% less than once a month (the mean was slightly more than once a month). Among these 15 to 18-year-olds, there was a modest but nonsignificant trend to increase the frequency of movie attendance as age increases; males reported slightly, but nonsignificantly, greater frequency of film-going than females.

The first research question inquired as to the importance of the ten variables to an individual when deciding which film to attend. Table 1 reports, by percentage, the distribution of responses for the ten variables.

Insert Table 1 About Here

As can be seen, clearly the most important variable to these respondents is the movie's plot. Nearly 85% of the sample reported film plot as

either "very important" or "important" in influencing their film attendance decision. Impressive as this finding appears, its validity, however, can be called into question. Respondents may have had different conceptual and cognitive images of what "plot" meant. Some individuals, for instance, might interpret "plot" in terms of film genre (e.g., westerns, musicals, science fiction) while others think of "plot" as related to a film's pace (e.g., high action versus a more pensive pace). Moreover, some individuals might make unique conceptual links between these various plot dimensions (e.g., associating high action with the gangster genre) resulting in further clouding of the variable, and hence interpretation. Essentially, then, the use of a variable name such as "plot," as was done in this study, is probably too gross a term. Therefore, the validity of the data gathered on this variable is viewed as highly suspect and must be interpreted with a great deal of caution.

While no other variable attains as nearly as high "importance" percentages as plot, by summing the "very important" and "important" percentages of responses other influential variables include: what friends say (54%), the film's MPAA rating (53.3%), female star (44.4%), and male star (39.1%). For the two "star" variables, however, it is important to note that 41.3% and 45.3% of the respondents also judged the female and male stars respectively as "neither important nor unimportant." That a film's MPAA rating was influential to so many may be reasonably interpreted as an indication of the rating system's visibility and personal utility. Further, although the survey instrument did not probe this dimension, it is plausible to speculate^{that} specific ratings carry with them meaningful connotations that are applied differentially to attendance decisions (e.g.,

for some, an X-rating may signify titillating film content while, for others, the same rating may be associated with aversive film content). Conversely, by summing the "very unimportant" and "unimportant" percentages of responses the following uninfluential variables result: producer (59.4%), director (50.8%), screenwriter (43.8%), and what parents say (39.4%). Thus, three behind-the-camera production personnel, and individuals outside the respondents' peer group were deemed unimportant to movie attendance decision-making.

It can be logically and validly argued that the influence of the various production variables on attendance is contingent on sources external to the variables themselves and hence these variables must be viewed as contaminated. The influence of plot, for example, is probably dependent on interpersonal interaction, reading of reviews, viewing TV ads, or seeing trailers since one cannot have ^{first-hand} knowledge of a film's plot prior to actual viewing of the film. Nonetheless, it is sensible to assume that even though some degree of contamination is to be expected (whether through interpersonal or mass mediated channels), the production variables may still be differentially salient to various individuals. Therefore, while the contribution of who directed a film to subsequent attendance is most likely to be determined by reading advertisements listing such credits, the importance of the variable to different individuals is likely to fluctuate. (In fact, knowledge of, or information about, production personnel is probably highly dependent on exposure to print media such as newspaper advertisements.) In sum, the purity of the production variables is not being asserted; rather, what is being measured is the differential influence of these variables, given their contaminated essence.

When comparing each variable with regard to the age and sex of the respondents a few significant differences were found (the minimum alpha level for all significance tests that follow was set at .05). In contrast to other age groups, the 17-year-old aggregate reported the male star ($p < .05$, $X^2 = 22.687$, $df = 12$) and friends ($p < .025$, $X^2 = 29.79$, $df = 12$) as significantly important⁵ and parents as significantly unimportant ($p < .05$, $X^2 = 21.533$, $df = 12$) to their film choice. The finding that friends were of significant influence in film attendance decisions corresponds with the extant literature in the personal influence paradigm. That parents were significantly unimportant to attendance decisions relates to the above finding in that parents fall outside the respondents' peer group. Finally, film music was found to be significantly more important to males than females ($p < .05$, $X^2 = 9.813$, $df = 4$).⁶ A possible explanation for this, tentatively advanced, is that males may be more attuned to popular music than females (at the time of the survey's distribution Grease and Saturday Night Fever were being shown locally; both films had had several hit singles, taken from their soundtracks, on the charts).

To achieve a better, more efficient (than with Chi-square), estimate of population differences, two-way analysis of variance tests were performed on the criterion variables using age and sex as independent variables. In three instances significant differences were found. Tables 2, 3, and 4 report these findings.⁷

Insert Table 2 About Here

Insert Table 3 About Here

Insert Table 4 About Here

Males reported friends' comments and film plot as significantly more important to their attendance decision than did females. This result is perhaps a function of conventional dating behavior and role expectancies. If males are the decision-makers for the evenings' activities generally, then they, moreso than females, might be motivated to seek and utilize more information concerning an "appropriate" film for their date. The nonsignificant findings between females and the variables under consideration may be due to socialization factors and may be indicative that these females are still taking a passive role in their dating activities (i.e., they are being "asked out" by males who make the plans -- or they allow the males to make the plans -- for the date). For the screenwriter, 17-year-old males found this variable significantly unimportant to their attendance decision thereby indicating its very low salience.

The second research question this study sought to answer was the nature of the relationships among these ten variables. Following listwise deletion of missing data, Pearson product-moment correlations were computed (N=61). Table 5 presents the correlation matrix among the ten variables.

Insert Table 5 About Here

As would be intuitively expected, male and female stars were highly correlated (.847, $p < .001$) with each other as were producer and director (.6919, $p < .001$). The screenwriter was found to significantly ($p < .001$) correlate with both the producer (.6107) and director (.6126). This finding, too, makes intuitive sense; the screenwriter, producer, and director are all key production personnel. The director was also associated with film music (.35, $p < .01$), male star (.3513, $p < .01$), female star (.4055, $p < .001$), and negatively correlated with what friends say (-.2319, $p < .05$). The low correlations between attendance and the ten variables can be explained by the differential wording structure in the survey instrument. The participants evaluated the variable items in terms of their importance to attendance decision whereas the attendance item asked for the respondents' frequency of movie-going. Clearly these two dimensions are not congruent.

Using the ten variables on which measurements were obtained for this study, the final research question asked if a predictive equation reaching statistical significance could be constructed. Accordingly, the data were entered by forward stepwise inclusion into a multiple regression analysis with film attendance as the dependent variable. As Jennrich (15, p. 58) notes, the stepwise routine allows the researcher to "steer the [predictor variable] additions by statistically meaningful criteria." Here the criteria utilized were: number of variables in the predictor list = 10; $F = .01$; and tolerance = .001. The summary portion of the regression analysis is presented in Table 6.

Insert Table 6 About Here

As can be seen, one variable, director, failed to meet the established inclusion criteria and is therefore not included in the table. The remaining nine variables account for 15.6% of the total variance. From this one might conclude that the predictive value of these variables is virtually null. However, the low variance explained percentage of these variables, as was the case with the above correlation analysis, may be a function of the two incompatible dimensions tapped by the questionnaire (frequency of attendance as opposed to the importance of a given variable to attendance decision-making). Further, the heuristic value of these variables cannot be dismissed out of hand given the exploratory nature of this study.

The present study offers numerous avenues for further investigation. Future research needs to be conducted on the concept of film plot. One possible strategy for approaching this concept is through the use of multidimensional scaling. As previously noted, research inquiring as to the magnitude of the source (interpersonal or mass mediated) of contamination to the production variables is needed before reliable estimates of their influence can be made. In addition, the influence of myriad other variables, not considered here, on film attendance must be researched. Possible decision criteria such as the relative proximity of the various theaters where films are playing, weather (daily and seasonal), and cost (admission price, gas, parking, babysitter, etc.) still await investigation. Moreover, the role of advertising (print, electronic, and in-house trailers) and different advertising strategies (e.g., the early, enigmatic, ads for The China Syndrome as opposed to reliance on reputation and familiarity as was employed in the marketing of Jaws II — "Just when you thought it was safe to^{go} back in the water") demand attention. All these variables, and a plethora of others, individually and in the aggregate, confront and challenge the film audience researcher.

FOOTNOTES

¹See for instance (18).

²A sampling of the early studies include: (8, 9, 10, 14, 16, 20, and 24). Bannerman and Lewis (4, p. 129) note that "Scholarly interest in the movies audience [sic] has waned greatly since the advent of television, and recent studies are scarce."

³For post-1960 foreign and cross-cultural film audience research see Austin (3).

⁴These individuals, termed "Descriptors" by Austin (2), while providing valuable points of departure for the social scientist, offer little in the way of systematically and empirically advancing the state of knowledge.

⁵Further, as would be logically expected, seniors reported parents as significantly less important than did sophomores and juniors ($p < .05$, $X^2 = 16.441$, $df = 8$).

⁶Additionally, when the "neither important nor unimportant" responses were removed and the summed frequencies of "very important" and "important" were compared to the summed frequencies of "very unimportant" and "unimportant" by sex (thereby creating a 2 X 2 table) significantly more males than females indicated that the MPAA rating was important ($p < .025$, $X^2 = 5.347$, $df = 1$) to their movie selection. Using the same procedure, friends were shown to be significantly more important than parents ($p < .005$, $X^2 = 10.291$, $df = 1$) in effecting film choice. Not surprisingly, then, peers serve a more influential function than do parents.

⁷Sums of squares associated with the two main effects and interaction effects do not sum to the total sum of squares since the design was non-orthogonal and the regression approach to ANOVA was employed (all effects are assessed simultaneously with each effect adjusted for all other effects).

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Table 1

Importance of Selected Variables to Movie Attendance Decisions

	Very im- portant	Important	Neither important nor unim- portant	Unim- portant	Very un- important	Total*	N
Plot	38.1%	46.0%	9.5%	4.8%	1.6%	100.0%	63
Friends	10.9	53.1	17.2	15.6	3.1	99.9	64
MPAA Rating	6.5	46.8	32.3	11.3	3.2	100.1	62
Director	6.3	12.7	30.2	33.3	17.5	100.0	63
Female Star	6.3	38.1	41.3	11.1	3.2	100.0	63
Music	6.3	25.0	46.9	12.5	9.4	100.1	64
Male Star	4.7	34.4	45.3	14.1	1.6	100.1	64
Parents	3.2	25.4	36.5	25.4	9.5	100.0	63
Producer	3.1	10.9	26.6	32.8	26.6	100.0	64
Writer	1.6	9.4	45.3	21.9	21.9	100.1	64

*Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Table 2

Importance of Friends on Film Attendance Decision by Age and Sex

Source	SS	df	ms	<u>F</u>	p
Total	61.937	63	.983		
Age	5.442	3	1.814	1.982	.127
Sex	3.780	1	3.780	4.129	.047
Age X Sex	2.935	3	.978	1.069	.370
Error	51.258	56	.915		

(N=64)

Table 3

Importance of Plot on Film Attendance Decision by Age and Sex

Source	SS	df	ms	<u>F</u>	P
Total	49.714	62	.802		
Age	.620	3	.207	.258	.855
Sex	4.704	1	4.704	5.884	.019
Age X Sex	2.396	3	.799	.999	.400
Error	43.969	55	.799		

(N=63)

Table 4

Importance of Screenwriter on Film Attendance Decision by Age and Sex

Source	SS	df	ms	<u>F</u>	p
Total	61.937	63	.983		
Age	7.270	3	2.423	3.092	.034
Sex	.335	1	.335	.427	.516
Age X Sex	7.282	3	2.427	3.097	.034
Error	43.892	56	.784		

(N=64)

Table 5

Correlations Between Selected Movie Attendance Decision Variables

	Attendance	Parents	Friends	Music	Writer	Plot	Producer
Parents	-.1573						
Friends	.0715	.3107**					
Music	.0525	-.0216	.0256				
Writer	.1043	-.0257	-.0650	.4222***			
Plot	.1070	-.0528	.0841	.1199	.0020		
Producer	.0439	-.0026	-.0907	.4227***	.6107***	.1342	
MCAA Rating	.2259*	.2421*	.2180*	.0254	.0705	-.0072	.1064
Female Star	.2049	-.0292	-.0664	.0739	.2382*	-.0030	.2941**
Male Star	.1664	-.0409	-.0646	-.0342	.1359	-.1087	.2242*
Director	.0066	.0118	-.2319*	.3500**	.6126***	.0284	.6919***

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

N = 61

Table 5

	MPAA Rating	Female Star	Male Star
Parents			
Friends			
Music			
Writer			
Plot			
Producer			
MPAA Rating			
Female Star	.0992		
Male Star	.0339	.8470 ^{***}	
Director	-.1488	.4055 ^{***}	.3513 ^{**}

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

N = 61

Table 6

Summary Table for Stepwise Regression

Variable	R ²	R ² Change	F Value	DF	Significance
MPAA Rating	.05105	.05105	3.17378	1, 59	.080
Parents	.09880	.04775	3.17936	2, 58	.049
Female Star	.12826	.02945	2.79538	3, 57	.048
Friends	.13813	.00987	2.24376	4, 56	.076
Plot	.14589	.00776	1.87896	5, 55	.113
Writer	.14797	.00207	1.56295	6, 54	.176
Producer	.15506	.00709	1.38944	7, 53	.229
Male Star	.15627	.00122	1.20391	8, 52	.315
Music	.15668	.00041	1.05284	9, 51	.413